



# SENATOR RUNNER'S WEEK IN REVIEW

## A WEEKLY REVIEW THAT WILL KEEP YOU INFORMED AND UP-TO-DATE



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### Vigilance Against the Anti-Accountability Advocates

On May 12, 2006, Judge Robert Freedman of the Alameda Superior Court invalidated the Legislature's requirement that high school students pass the California High School Exit Exam (often called "CAHSEE") as a condition of graduation. The California Supreme Court stayed this order on May 24, 2006, and ordered the Court of Appeal to review the case. Regardless of the final outcome in the courts, opponents of the exit exam will continue to try to undermine and kill it in the Legislature. Thus, it is important to know the background and positive effects of the exit exam – and the consequences of its rejection.

The Legislature created the exit exam through SB 2x (O'Connell, Chapter 1, Statutes of 1999). Up to that point, each school district set its own graduation requirements, resulting in wide variation in what a high school diploma actually represented. This patchwork system provided no guarantee to students, parents, and employers that a high school diploma represented any minimum standard, let alone attainment of the widely praised academic standards that the state had recently adopted.

The Legislature recognized this untenable arrangement, declaring in SB 2x that "[L]ocal proficiency standards . . . are generally set below a high school level and are not consistent with state adopted academic content standards." To rectify this, the Legislature created the exit exam "to ensure that students who graduate from high school can demonstrate grade level competency in reading, writing, and mathematics," and concluding that "the state must set higher expectations for high school graduation." Despite the urgency, development of the exit exam and its implementation was open, measured, and deliberate.

### What the Exit Exam Requires

Originally, SB2x required that students would have to pass the exit exam in order to graduate, beginning with the Class of 2004. In 2003, the State Board approved a delay, pushing back the requirement to pass the exit exam to the Class of 2006. Thus, for seven years the exit exam requirement has been law; indeed, when the law was enacted, students in the Class of 2006 were in 5th grade. Students are required to take the test in 10th grade, but students who fail have five additional opportunities to pass one or both sections, including two in 11th grade and three in 12th. The State Board also did not set the bar exceedingly high -- quite the contrary. The English

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language arts section, measuring up to 10th grade standards, requires correct answers on 60 percent of the questions. The mathematics portion, testing up to 7th grade standards, plus algebra, requires a score of 55 percent. Failure is discouraged. Schools are required to offer supplemental instruction – including summer school, before or after school, Saturdays, or during intersession – to any student of any grade to who does not demonstrate (through test scores or grades) sufficient progress toward passing the exit exam. Clearly, the state has not set up students to fail.

### **Independent Evaluation: “Keep the Exit Exam.”**

That the exit exam benefits students and schools is demonstrated through independent evaluations and by increasing pass rates among all students. The Human Resources Research Organization (HumRRO) has conducted detailed, annual surveys, interviews, and analyses of the exit exam requirement since 2000. HumRRO, in its February 2006 report, repeats the recommendation it has consistently made: “Keep the CAHSEE requirement in place for the Class of 2006 and beyond.” Why this conclusion? Among other reasons, schools have responded to the exit exam requirements and are focusing instruction on students who are at risk of failing, and students are motivated by the clear consequences of failing the exam. Illustrating these responses are the compelling improvements students have demonstrated, as the table below shows.

**Improved Cumulative Pass Rates Show  
Exit Exam Improves Student Academic Achievement**

<b>Student Group</b>	<b>Cumulative Pass Rate, Class of 2006</b>	
	<b>% Passed, Grade 10</b>	<b>% Passed, Grade 12</b>
<b>All</b>	<b>69%</b>	<b>89%</b>
African American	52%	80%
Asian	80%	94%
Hispanic	56%	82%
White	82%	96%
Economically Disadvantaged	55%	82%
English Language Learner	36%	69%

Any objective observer examining the changes brought about subsequent to the enactment of the exit exam requirement would conclude that it has focused educators and benefited students in particular and the state as a whole. Unfortunately, not all observers are objective.

### **Anti-Accountability Arguments Against Exit Exam**

Anti-accountability advocates began efforts to kill the exit even prior to its enactment. Most opposition argument takes the following form: “It’s not fair!” Opponents declare that it is unfair for the Legislature to hold all students to the same minimum standard because not all students receive an equal “opportunity to learn.” For example, they point to variation in teacher quality, the lack of textbooks in some schools, deteriorating facilities, the difficulty of non-English speakers to pass a test in English. And they point to “inadequate” funding. In addition, opponents assert, the pressure of having to face the exit exam will lead to higher dropout rates, and all the economic and social upheaval that implies. The truth is, however, that dropout rates did not increase, but declined, likely because students received greater attention and achieved greater success in school. The funding inequity myth is also bunk. Schools are generally funded on an equal dollars per student basis, and average per pupil funding in California is over \$11,000. Each school district is provided an identical amount of basic funding per student for textbooks, for example, and the law requires districts to certify that each student has a book in each core subject area. Furthermore, the state provides significantly greater amounts of funding targeted to assist low income and non-English speaking students. But for some, this is not enough. The long-term solution for the

education lobbyists is their long-time mantra: huge funding infusions and an ominous redistribution of wealth. Meanwhile, the so-called “advocates” for struggling students suggest granting these students a diploma and pushing them into society unprepared for work and civic responsibility – an invitation to a life of poverty. Simply handing someone a piece a paper may work for scarecrows in the Land of Oz, but it does not work in Kansas – or even California.

### **To Be a Public Advocate**

Despite continual losses in the Legislature and courts the opponents of accountability will not give up easily, precisely because they are not accountable. Policymakers and others in positions of responsibility, who must put aside parochial interests and be genuine public advocates, must resist attempts to undermine the exit exam. Opponents will continue to seek out judges to legislate from the bench. They will attempt to chip away at the exam by creating loopholes through which kids can obtain a diploma. They will sponsor legislation to “simply” gather more data on the exam – data that they will manipulate in order to pad their next anti-accountability class-action lawsuit. They will continue to demand that taxpayers spend ever more money on schools, but will never say how much is enough. They will continue to create new “programs,” but will never support the structural reforms necessary to free families and students from the government-union education complex. It is up to responsible people – true public advocates – to continue to shine light on and break down the soft bigotry of lowered expectations and to demand an education system that frees families and students to seek out and excel in the setting of their choice.

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